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The Potential of Immigrant Youth

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Introduction

Ann S. Masten, Karmela Liebkind, and Donald J. Hernandez

The success and well-being of immigrant youth has become a global concern for many stakeholders at multiple levels, including individuals, families, schools, neighborhoods, local and national economies and governments, and international relations. Millions of young people live and grow up in countries where they or their parents were not born, often as a result of families moving to find a better life or fleeing disastrous circumstances. Consequently, ethno-cultural diversity is rapidly becoming the rule rather than the exception in many nation states and communities of the world, particularly in wealthier host nations. As noted by Hernandez in Chapter 1 on the demography of immigration, immigrants represent the fastest growing segment of the population in many affluent countries. Consequently, the economic and social future of multiple nations is highly dependent on the success of immigrant children and youth. Moreover, immigrant families are transforming the neighborhoods and societies in which they settle. Recent migration has brought immense changes, challenges, and opportunities to host and sending nations, as well as the individuals and families who migrate.

This volume is based on the Jacobs Foundation Conference, “Capitalizing on Migration: The Potential of Immigrant Youth,” held at Schloss Marbach, in Germany, on 22-24 April, 2009. The Jacobs Foundation, which is strongly committed to the support of science, practice, and policy pertaining to productive youth development, sponsored this conference in response to growing international interest in migration and the well-being of immigrant youth. Leading international scholars in demography, human development, economics, social psychology, education, immigrant mental health, and sociology gathered to address urgent questions about

the current status and future potential of immigrant youth. The chapters of this volume reflect the diverse perspectives of the contributors and provide an overview of current leading research and its implications for practice and policy. The chapters point to promising directions for future research on the development and well-being of immigrant youth and how to facilitate their potential. Given the growing number of immigrant youth in many host nations, understanding the processes leading to success of immigrant youth has tremendous potential to benefit national economies and societies, as well as individual youth and their families, both in the near term and foreseeable future.

In European Union countries and the United States, there has been a rapid recent increase in the numbers of first and second generation immigrant young people over the past two decades, due to both immigration and births in immigrant families. As a result, the proportion of children living in immigrant families with at least one foreign-born parent has increased dramatically in many nations. For example, recent data indicate that the proportion of all children (ages 0 to 17) with one foreign-born parent is 40% in Switzerland, 23% in Germany, 22% in the Netherlands, and 23% in the United States (Hernandez, Macartney, & Blanchard, 2009). Insofar as many arrive from non-Western developing countries, this surge in immigration is leading to large increases in cultural and ethnic diversity in the European Union and the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by the year 2030 fewer than one-half of all children in the U. S. will be non-Hispanic whites and more than one-half will belong to ethnic minorities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

For the purposes of this volume, “immigrant youth” refers to first and second generation youth (those born outside the country and native-born children with at least one immigrant parent) and third and later generation youth to native-born children of native-born parents. Age

of migration is a focus of some discussion (e.g., see Chapter 5 by Corak), contrasting earlier and later ages of arrival, although this issue is not discussed explicitly in terms of the “1.5 generation” (referring to immigrant children who arrive early in life and therefore grow up largely in the new country; Rumbaut, 1994).

Not only the first generation but also second and third generation immigrants born in receiving countries may be viewed – and treated – as “second class” citizens, while at the same time individual immigrants and families may thrive and prosper. Attitudes toward immigrant youth vary widely within and across receiving countries. Displacements from war and disaster, as well as changing labour markets, may attract diverse immigrant workers and their children to communities previously homogeneous in ethnicity or religion. Consequently, public schools in many receiving communities are increasingly charged with educating young people from many cultures with varying degrees of fluency in the language of the education system, which is typically the host-country official language. Schools are asked to prepare these students for future labour markets and responsible civic engagement. In this dynamic context, the adaptation, integration, and development of immigrant youth and their families is an important issue, with profound implications for receiving and sending nations.

While the adaptation and productivity of immigrant youth are clearly issues of global concern, engaging a wide array of scientific disciplines, a successful scientific conference and volume require a more delimited focus. The 2009 Jacobs Conference and consequently this volume were organized around a set of key questions, described below, that are central to the core goal of realizing the full potential of immigrant youth for the sake of host societies, global well-being, and the immigrants themselves. Although it included research and discussions about a variety of host nations, the conference emphasized research on immigration to Europe and

North America. This emphasis was chosen because of the large scope of migration to these regions, the rising concerns in these two regions about the extent of migration, and the preponderance of current research and researchers that have focused on migration to nations in these regions.

Recognizing that nations, employers, and those charged with educating and promoting the potential of immigrant youth cannot wait for definitive answers to all questions posed at the conference, there was a commitment in the conference to discuss not only the findings and shortcomings from the best available research, but also the implications of findings to date for policy and practice. There was a strong consensus at the conference on the importance of active cooperation and collaboration among researchers and policymakers to improve the opportunities for immigrant youth in society and to ease the processes of integration and acculturation, both for immigrants and the receiving population.

Consequences of migration include growth, change, and conflict at many levels of human life, from individual development and adaptation to integration at the level of nations and international global politics. The success of immigrant youth is undoubtedly shaped by complex interactions among systems at many levels. These include the characteristics of receiving and sending cultures, the nature of the contexts in which immigrant youth live, learn, play, and work (families, peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods), and individual development.

Many aspects of context are examined in the chapters of this volume, ranging from government policies to the ethnic composition of school classrooms, and from language spoken at home or at school to intergroup attitudes. Perceived and observed discrimination are critically important aspects of context for the adaptation of immigrant youth. Human development itself is an important context for understanding immigrant youth as they interact with other people in

their host communities and in their own cultures and families. Expectations for youth vary by age or development, as well as by gender, ethnicity, and local or regional culture. These expectations can influence attitudes held by self and others about one immigrant individual or about groups of immigrant young people.

Many of the chapters in this volume embrace a dynamic and developmental systems view of human adaptation in the context of migration, characterized by interaction between and change among many groups and systems that together shape the adaptation of individuals, families, schools, communities, and larger systems of human life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Gottlieb, 2007; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007; Verkuyten, 2005). Thus, immigrant youth shape the families and communities in which they live while, simultaneously, individual youth development is itself shaped by interactions (both of their own and of their families) with communities and various in- and outgroups. In many of the chapters, authors emphasize that immigration is transforming receiving cultures at the same time that receiving cultures are influencing immigrants over time and generation. A bi-directional and dynamic view of acculturation is prevalent across the volume, with immigrant cultures and host cultures both undergoing change (Berry, 2006; Sam & Berry, 2010; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010).

Organization of the Volume

The volume is organized around the three primary questions posed at the Jacobs Conference.

- *Who migrates and what do we know about the socio-demographic status, living conditions, and well-being of immigrant youth?*
- *Who succeeds and why?*

- *What works to promote the potential of immigrant youth?*

In the first section of the volume, multinational data on migration are presented, along with data on the poverty, living conditions, and receiving contexts of immigrant youth. Some authors summarize findings from important immigration research projects, such as the Eight Country Study described by Hernandez in Chapter 1, while others present results of new analyses like Chapters 2, 3, and 4 by Beck and Tienda, Smeeding et al., and Corak. Hernandez provides descriptive data from eight affluent countries on the prevalence, diversity, and well-being of immigrant youth. The data underscore the importance of success among these youth for the future economic vitality of these nations and the significance of policies and practices that influence the extent to which immigrant youth are supported in that success.

Beck and Tienda in Chapter 2 provide illuminating data on the living arrangements and quality of context for migrant youth in six developed nations, drawing on the International Public Use Micro-data Samples (IPUMS) of census data. Their analyses link context features in these countries to school enrollment, a key marker of adaptation available in the data. In Chapter 3, Smeeding and colleagues draw on data from 14 nations, available from two sources (Luxembourg Income Study and European Statistics on Living Conditions), to examine cross-national variation in policies and successes relevant to poverty and immigrant youth. Their analyses support the provocative conclusion that the country where one lands matters more than one's native or immigrant status.

Corak also analyzed original census data, in this case from Canada, to examine the relation of age arrival to success of immigrant youth, testing the role developmental timing may play in the complex processes involved in the development and adaptation of immigrant youth. The results he presents in Chapter 4 are compelling in suggesting that early age of arrival (prior

to adolescence and secondary schooling years) is very important for school and economic success, but also that the match is crucial between language experience in the child's history (or the sending context) with the language of the host country. When there is continuity in language, it is not surprising to find that age of arrival matters less.

The second part of the book on “who succeeds” is focused on theory and research pertaining to processes that may account for differences in adaptive or developmental success among individual immigrant youth, among different groups of immigrants in the same communities, or among immigrant youth from similar origins that end up in different contexts, including schools or countries. In Chapter 5, five leading investigators who study immigrant youth from three distinct perspectives present a unified framework for research on this population. This collaboration grew out of a 2008 Summer School on the interplay of development and context, co-sponsored by the Jacobs Foundation and the European Society for Developmental Psychology, held in Syros, Greece. Motti-Stefanidi, Berry, Chrysoschoou, Sam, and Phinney present the key conceptual contributions from research on development, social psychology, and acculturation of immigrant youth, followed by their integrative framework for linking theoretical and empirical findings across these fields to understand the adaptation and development of immigrant youth. Their model offers a way forward for future research concerned with the well-being of immigrant youth to bridge key areas of investigation, while at the same time it may serve as a bridge linking investigators from varying disciplines that typically have proceeded without the benefit of ideas and methods from other important perspectives.

In Chapter 6, Garcia Coll and her colleagues review the evidence on the “immigrant paradox,” which refers to the observation that in some domains of well-being, recent immigrants

show better adaptation than contemporary native peers and later generations of the same immigrant group. It is a complex topic, with many possible explanations. These authors draw on diverse findings to document the paradox and also offer possible explanations. Among their intriguing suggestions is the idea that immigrant families may bring important values and human and social capital with them to the host country that are subsequently lost in future generations. Sustaining these resources throughout the processes of acculturation and across generations may be a priority for preventive interventions. Coll and colleagues close their chapter with a set of questions to guide future research on this important and perhaps not so paradoxical theme.

In Chapter 7, Fuligni and Telzer focus on the contributions of immigrant youth to their families and the processes by which these roles may help or hinder their own adaptation as well as successful acculturation by families and receiving societies. Their chapter addresses a neglected theme in the discourse on immigrant research by emphasizing the key role that children and youth of immigrant families may play as cultural brokers, assisting communication between hosts and families, as social capital for the economic success of families, and also as economic contributors to families and thereby communities. The authors consider the benefits and costs of these various roles to the immigrant youth and the underappreciated contributions of these youth to the receiving societies. They present data from a large longitudinal study that included daily diaries kept by youth to document these family roles and conclude with comments on ways to appreciate and affirm the contributions of these youth without exploiting them.

The three other chapters in the second part of the book (Chapters 8, 9, and 10) focus on the processes and significance of different aspects of identity formation and development for understanding and guiding efforts to promote successful adaptation in immigrant youth and their receiving contexts. These chapters emphasize different factors relevant to identity processes

during the developmental period of adolescence, a time in the life course when identity exploration deepens and intensifies.

In Chapter 8, Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti, and Mähönen emphasize the central importance of harmonious intergroup relations for multicultural societies and for immigrant youth in those societies. They examine the challenges facing immigrant youth as they resolve cultural and national identities. In particular, these authors underscore the reciprocal nature of social identities and intergroup attitudes as communities and immigrants adapt to each other. They delineate the evidence on bi-directional influences of intergroup attitudes and perceived or experienced discrimination, and describe effective strategies for reducing prejudice. Liebkind et al. discuss the convergence of evidence from social psychology and acculturation literatures suggesting that positive subgroup identities for each interacting subgroup (e.g., ethnic identity) combined with a common superordinate identity (e.g., national identity) provides the most adaptive resolution for harmonious intergroup relations. They also emphasize the point that interventions need to be directed at the majority cultural group as well as the minority or immigrant subgroups.

In Chapter 9, Verkuyten also emphasizes the significance and potential of strong ethnic identity for positive intergroup attitudes and behavior, and therefore the importance of positive ethnic identities for the well-being of multicultural societies and the individuals within them. Verkuyten describes the key theories that have contributed to our understanding of identity in immigrant and other youth in developmental, acculturative, and social psychological sciences. He also makes a strong case for the multi-dimensional study of ethnic identity, underscoring the importance of ethnic behavior in actual interactions with in- and outgroup members where ethnic selves are enacted and/or change.

In Chapter 10, Sirin and Gupta focus on identity and adaptation in Muslim-American youth living in a post-9/11 world. They provide an overview of three studies of Muslim students in the United States, highlighting the challenges and successes in forging a cohesive identity at a difficult point in history. They report findings from a large group of students who “happily reside on the hyphen,” adapting to challenging experiences with impressive resilience. Their research opens a window on the strengths and needs of these youth, many of whom are immigrants. Their data are consistent with findings from very different situations (see Liebkind et al., Chapter 8), suggesting that perceived or experienced discrimination reduces the likelihood of positive dual identities (ethnic and national combined).

The third part of this volume is focused on the key question of “What works?” and evidence-informed strategies for promoting the potential of immigrant youth, given the knowledge to date. In Chapter 11, Kağıtçıbaşı presents her theory of the autonomous-related self and discusses the success of a prevention program she developed that is now widely used in Turkey and European countries. The program was designed to enrich the early education of children from families migrating from rural to urban centers, with beneficial effects observed in childhood and sustained into adolescence and early adulthood. Results are congruent with other international research supporting a high return on investment in high quality early childhood education for diverse groups of high-risk children, including immigrant children. The theme of early enrichment to promote the success of immigrant children is echoed in other chapters of this volume (e.g., Chapters 4 and 16 by Corak and Garcia).

Kağıtçıbaşı points out that contemporary international migration often takes the form of migration from societies that value relatedness and interdependence (both material and emotional; sometimes called “collectivistic” societies) to those that value autonomy and

independence (often termed “individualistic” societies). Kağıtçıbaşı asserts that humans have basic needs for both relatedness and autonomy and that these two goals are compatible when one distinguishes between the autonomy of “agency” and the idea of separation. She argues that the best resolution for both immigrant and non-immigrant youth can be achieved by blending the values of relatedness and autonomy to support educational and economic success along with interpersonal support and closeness.

In Chapter 12, Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, and Lewin-Bizan discuss the general framework of Positive Youth Development (PYD) in relation to immigrant youth. PYD, grounded in developmental systems theory, emphasizes the strengths and potential of all youth for the societies in which they live. For immigrant youth, the authors highlight the resources these youth bring to the host communities, including their bilingual and bicultural skills. This aspect of their chapter echoes points made by Fuligni and Telzer in Chapter 7 on the contributions of immigrant youth. In the PYD framework, a fundamental developmental task for immigrant youth is to manifest positive development in the new context. In addition, however, this chapter adds the idea that a fundamental responsibility of societies in which immigrant youth live and develop is to afford the opportunities and supports to facilitate the process and thereby gain human capital from the successes of these youth.

Chapter 13 by Silbereisen and colleagues provides an example of research on the positive development of immigrant youth that was based on the PYD conceptual framework. The study of “Migration and Societal Integration” is an ongoing effort involving Germany and Israel with the goal of comparing the adaptation of immigrants in diverse contexts to examine the role of transitions in psychosocial development. The adaptive criteria of interest are framed in the “5 Cs” of PDY: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring (Lerner et al., 2005).

Chapter 13 focuses on the German findings to date, highlighting the idea that adaptation during key formal and informal transitions in the life course can foster advancement in the 5 Cs, including the transition into kindergarten, the first romantic relationship (usually in early adolescence), and the act of moving in with a partner (later adolescence or emerging adulthood). The chapter emphasizes the similarity between immigrant and native youth in the effects of the transitions but also points at differences between cultural groups in levels of adaptation, regardless of transitions and resources.

Three chapters in the third section of the volume highlight the importance of education and the school context for promoting the success of immigrant youth and thereby building the human capital of host communities and nations. In Chapter 14, Horenczyk and Tatar discuss school as a key context for adaptation in immigrants with respect to both development and acculturation, a broad theme echoed in many other chapters of this volume. They propose a multi-level (school, classroom) and multi-faceted conceptual framework for understanding the school acculturative context. They assess multiple aspects of school climate, like visual signals, norms, values, and assumptions. They also assess the perspectives of immigrant students compared to other students, and emphasize that the attitudes, expectations, and behaviors of both national and immigrant classmates and teachers affect the acculturation and adaptation of immigrant students. Peer relations between immigrant and national peers, including friendship, are discussed as key contexts for reciprocal acculturation. Their discussion underscores the importance of school orientation (assimilationist versus multicultural) and the potential afforded by this important context for promoting cultural change, cultural understanding, and development.

In Chapter 15, Spiel and Strohmeier focus their discussion on peer relationships, with illustrative findings from research in Austria and other European countries. Research on the role of peer relations in acculturation and intervention research with schools that have immigrant students is surprisingly scarce given the well-documented significance of peer relations in adaptation and development (Gest, Sesma, Masten, & Tellegen, 2006). The authors focus on positive and negative aspects of peer relationships, with friendship serving as the example of the former and bullying/victimization as the example of the latter. They find, as expected, that homophily (attraction based on similarities) is characteristic of friendships in immigrant youth. In addition, their research underscores the effects of ethnic composition of schools and classrooms on immigrant friendships, a finding consistent with the hypothesized role of opportunity for intercultural friendships. In regard to bullying, one interesting difference observed between immigrant and native youth concerns the function of this behavior. In two different countries, immigrant boys were found to bully others in order to feel affiliated, while native boys appeared to bully others to feel dominant and powerful.

Spiel and Strohmeier suggest strategies for promoting positive peer relations in multicultural schools, based on evidence from basic and applied research. They present examples from two evidence-informed programs in Austria that targeted the whole school in an effort to improve peer relations and thereby the well-being of immigrant and native youth. They also note the counterproductive effects that “tracking” can have on intercultural friendships in schools when it segregates youth by ethnic group.

In Chapter 16, Garcia discusses what can be done to address the achievement disparities for disadvantaged minorities in American schools, a goal that he and others at the conference viewed as vital to promoting success among immigrant students. As noted above, growing

evidence supports the value of high quality child care and education for disadvantaged children (Heckman, 2006). Garcia highlights the themes of early enrichment, bilingual language development, and the value of preschool education for later success. Garcia focuses specifically on Latino children in U.S. schools, with an eye toward lessons gleaned from prevention research for promoting the potential of immigrant youth. He also emphasizes the role of dual language access for child development and parent involvement in child education.

Language skills play a crucial role in early school success and language development was one of the salient themes emerging in discussions at the 2009 Jacobs Conference. The participants at the conference agreed on the value in promoting the acquisition of the dominant host society language for success in that context while preserving the cultural capital represented by multilingual capabilities of parents and children. Bilingual education can be viewed as an investment in the language literacy of a society, enhancing the “linguistic capital” of a country by promoting the acquisition of the dominant, unifying language of the society at the same time that skills in different languages are preserved in subgroups and immigrants and promoted in the native population. Recent evidence on the possible role of bilingual learning for brain development and the acquisition of executive function skills offers additional support to the case supporting multiple-language learning in children (e.g., Carlson & Meltzoff, 2008).

This third section of the volume closes with a suitably broad commentary by Nolan in Chapter 17 on the challenges and opportunities of understanding “what works” for promoting success in immigrant youth and implementing successful changes in practices and policies to impact youth success. Nolan offers a framework for organizing findings and policies pertinent to this multifaceted agenda without oversimplifying the complexities of contextual, developmental, and individual differences. Nolan concludes that both general and targeted strategies to promote

the potential of immigrant youth are needed and serve different purposes, offering a strong rationale for both approaches. General programs that support educational attainment and healthy development in disadvantaged children and families living in poverty will impact immigrant families, who fall disproportionately into these segments of the population. Targeted programs that address specific barriers and issues of immigrants, such as language needs for education, unique health issues related to international migration, or housing discrimination are also important. Nolan supports the availability of “second chances” for re-entry and training in the education system and labor market. His framework encompasses issues of family, housing, health, psychology, and education presented in many earlier chapters, along with economic strategies.

Conclusions

Throughout the conference and this resulting volume, major themes emerged regarding the challenges of and opportunities for promoting the potential of immigrant youth. It was clear that there are numerous barriers and questions that remain to be addressed, including important limitations in the quality of research available. At the same time, there are converging and compelling conclusions on how to move forward despite these challenges. The following summary points illustrate the counterpoints of challenges and opportunities recurring across this volume.

- Immigrant youth can be a vital source of future human and social capital for their host nations, but one of the barriers to developing and benefitting from this potential is that immigrant youth may not be perceived this way in receiving communities and nations.
- Additional obstacles remain to fulfilling the promise of immigrant youth, including discrimination and lack of access to adequate education, health care, or housing.

- Many promising strategies are available to address these barriers, although few strategies have strong experimental evidence to support their efficacy with immigrant youth.
- Additional research designed to inform strategic practices and policies is needed.
- Better methodology and international collaborations would serve to advance the knowledge base and the application agenda to benefit immigrants and the nations that receive and send them.
- Immigrant youth face many challenges but often succeed in ways that foster the well-being of their families and host nations.
- Language skills are a key component of adaptive success in contemporary affluent societies.
- Investing in bilingualism and bicultural (ethnic and national) identities yields benefits for societies as well as individuals.
- Addressing perceived discrimination is crucial to harmonious intergroup relations.
- Harmonious intergroup relations are central to the well-being of individual multicultural nations and have fundamental roles to play in global well-being.

The chapters of this volume highlight the contributions and the yet-to-be-realized potential of research on migration, acculturation, and the development or adaptation of individuals, families, and nations in the context of migration. Migration and pressing international economic issues are drawing attention to the importance of understanding the interplay of culture and development of individuals, families, communities, and nations, not only with respect to fostering productive youth development, but also for the much broader agenda of informing science or policy, and promoting positive interpersonal and intergroup relations at many levels of human affairs.

At the same time, it is clear that there is much work to be done. In particular, high-quality research on what works to promote the success of immigrant youth in the near and far future remains quite limited, particularly given the numbers of immigrant youth in many communities and nations around the world and the importance of their success for many stakeholders. Collaborative, translational, and multidisciplinary research, designed to inform policies and practices as well as theory in diverse fields, has an essential role to play in understanding and promoting the potential of immigrant youth.

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